



A film by Jeanette Groenendaal

draMAYama

Starring Branly Gio Lopez

A space-time travel
From the Director of Dutch Cocaine Factory

Following the noteworthy docu-fiction Dutch Cocaine Factory and film Reformation, DraMAYama is the third creation by Jeanette Groenendaal, revolving around an altered state of mind. For this docu-journey she follows a Guatemalan timekeeper in his quest for meaning along the nine Temples for the Planets (Nava Graha) in south India. This is no readymade truth served on a platter, but an impressionistic film, carving space for the viewer to experience their own pilgrimage.

by JACQ. ALGRA

“I want to make space for unheard voices and broaden our gaze.”

Since completing a masters in Advanced Research at the University of the Arts in Amsterdam, Jeanette Groenendaal (Amsterdam, 1964) has developed an expansive oeuvre with live performances, installations on the cutting edge of science and art, video portraits and experimental documentaries. Simultaneously she has immersed herself in astrology, following different courses, leading sessions in Astro-Magical Initiations, and writes astrology columns and organizes research trips through south India.

What fascinates you about astrology and when did the fascination begin?

What I find interesting about astrology is that it is a universal language, a language that gives symbols to different principles. We all know these principles, all around the world. If you go to an astrological convention, there are Muslims, Christians and atheists, Russians and Americans, psychologists and many other scientists.

I want to integrate the knowledge of the solar system in my life, something people have done for thousands of years. It doesn't need to be mystical. It is for me as much a mathematical practice as a kind of meditation to visualize the four-dimensional movement of the planetary bodies.

I think that the fascination began around the time of the first moon landing, when I was four years old. I remember that I could make a spatial representation of it. That was my first glimpse into space and the spheres. It was also the first time I became aware that Earth was a planet that, like other planets, had her place in the solar system, and that the planets' rotations followed the laws of nature. Translating these laws is what astrology does, in fact. The images of the landing on the moon brought a great change in perspective. I imagined how it would be to see the solar system from Venus or Jupiter. I gained a whole different view on our place in the universe. Thereafter I learned about atoms and the notion of worlds in worlds in earth science class: a universe just like the solar system housed in my chair.

I began to see the parallels between the micro- and macro- worlds. Furthermore I discovered that planets make sound as they travel through space. I found that extremely inspiring through the abstraction of space and time that it offered.”

**‘May the door of the Sun be opened. May the door of the Moon be opened.
Let it be clear in the Sky. Let it be clear on Earth. Let it be clear in the Soul.
So Darkness will not obscure the Light nor the Signs that direct our Path.’**

You went to India for the first time about thirty years ago. Because you’re an astrologist you were allowed to enter the Nava Graha in Tamil Nadu, which until that point was only open to Hindus. In the following years you continued to study that centuries old complex of Vedic temples for every planet. How did you learn about it and when did you come up with the idea for a film?

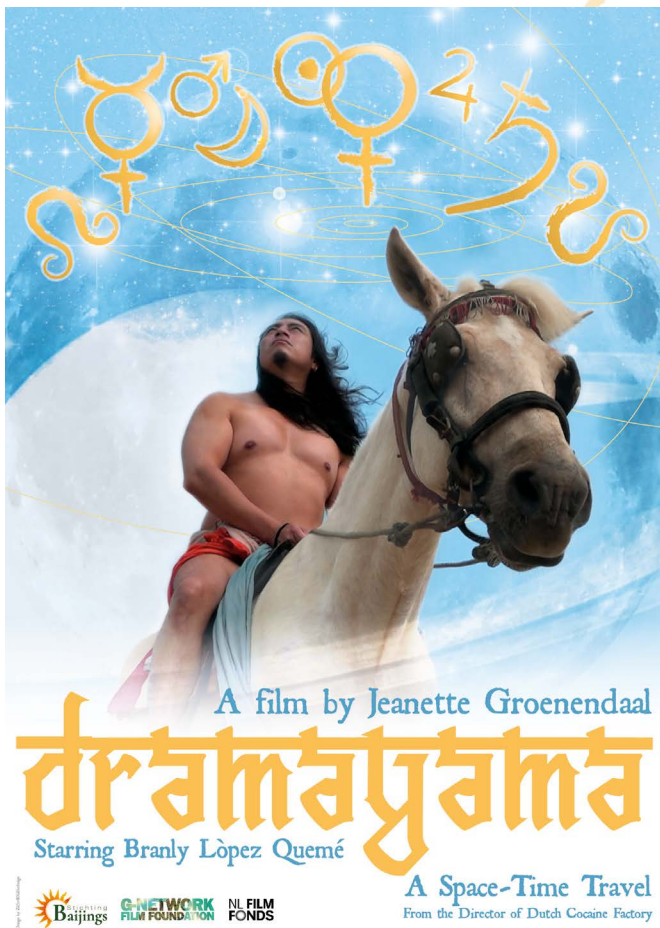
My very first trip began in Goa. After I saw a tourist die from a drug overdose, I took the bus as far as I could get from there. One evening I stepped off the bus in the south of India. It was full moon and all around me there were people dressed in white, and people dressed in black. It turned out that the moon was in conjunction with Saturn and they were performing a ritual: the people from Saturn were in black, and the people of the moon were in white. What I saw was a cosmo-choreography wherein worship of the planets was being mirrored in a social ritual as a practice.

It takes Jupiter 12 years to circle the sun. That is celebrated in India: it is the Kumbh Mela. Whenever Jupiter has completed 12 circles around the sun it’s called the Maha Kumbh Mela. Slowly I discovered that all the ritual calendars were based on the position of the planets. You can’t just read the rituals, you must be an astronomer or astrologer as well. I was educated as an artistic researcher, but sometimes see myself as a visual anthropologist.

At a certain moment I found a beautiful map: it was the pilgrimage through the solar system. I wanted to make this journey. But the temples are located in a completely non-touristic region, people hardly speak English and it is a labyrinth of sandy paths. It is a true quest just to find them all. Moreover you have to be present precisely on certain times and days: on Monday at the Moon Temple, Tuesday at Mars, Wednesday Mercury, Thursday Jupiter and Friday at the Venus temple. Over the years I have studied all of them by participation and insight.”

“Along the way I thought: this place is unknown to mass tourism This view on the past, these echo’s must be saved for the world. I want to make a film about this; the harry potter generation, cosmologists, astrologers, all people interested in rituals could learn something from watching. What we see aren’t ruins from temples like in Greece, Guatemala and Egypt, but living temples. You can read about the past in hindsight, in a book written by one or another Western scientist. But in this film you can experience how local, regular people in the present still perform rituals to the planets like in the old times, it has been passed on from generation to generation.”





‘We are here in K’Iche. The City was burned when the Spanish came. But the Maya still come to do their rituals to honor the ancestors.

I call upon my ancestors to take me to the Time and Space where I can find the Secrets of the Universe.’

You call DraMAYaMa an ‘experiential film’ in which the viewer experiences a pilgrimage through the eyes of the protagonist. To the spectator you want to reveal the world from the other side and forge an introduction of sorts. Why did you choose the perspective of Guatemalan timekeeper and healer Branly López Quémé?

The more I thought about the scenario, the more I realized I couldn’t present everything from the standpoint of myself as a Western director. I then started searching for someone who could discover and see the temple complex for themselves for the first time, someone with the desire to learn more, as I had.

Branly López Quémé was invited to Age of Wonderland, organized a few years ago organized by Hivos, Baltan Laboratories, Dutch Design Foundation and Design Academy, in Eindhoven. It was an experimental program that wanted to boost social change and social innovation worldwide. A program open to artists, creators and innovators from different countries, many of them with a history under colonization. For artists from countries with a history under colonization. They had the chance, with assistance from advisors, to research lost knowledge on Maya Cosmology. One of their advisors, a Russian mathematician (MaschaRu, they/them), asked me to be co-advisor because of my open and universal approach to astrology.

That’s how I met Branly, who was in search of Mayan knowledge. After ‘the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012’, he began to ask himself what the Maya actually were. In that period, all kinds of Western scientists were suddenly writing about Mayan culture. They were oppressed for 500 years through which an enormous amount of knowledge has been lost. From the Spanish colonizers they were prohibited from speaking their own language, from wearing their traditional clothes; Countless Mayans were murdered.

The Mayans had to be converted to Christianity; their astrological knowledge was labeled as primitive, pagan and witchcraft, and became forbidden knowledge. Branly wanted to search for himself what it meant to be Mayan, and to understand their calendar and complex cosmology.”

“During Age of Wonderland Branly performed a fire ritual. I recognized a similar structure in the ritual as the ones in the planetary temples in India I had seen. It’s then that I came up with the plan to let him experience the rituals there, instead of explaining everything about The Dravidian Temple life to him. Namely, it is not a knowledge that can be passed on in words, or through books, the knowledge is in learning from performing the ritual by yourself. The temple rituals are performed with flowers, honey, milk, gold or lead; they are intended as a means for transformation. The physical experience and thereafter personal interpretation of what you experience, that is how you learn. Layer by layer, in a constant stream.”

Rooted to a routeless path / Where does one begin again / Hear the sadness and the anger /
Whispering secrets you no longer understand / A lost love, a lost identity / Becoming an
outsider / Of your own history / But let's come together / and rediscover / Our oneness, our
oneness / We'll almost weightless / Draw a new path in the sand / We'll almost freely / Find
the depths that only we could know / We'll be in a constant state of becoming -
"On Lost Histories" by Stephanie Pan

With DraMAYama you've once more made a film that defies categorization. You film everything only once and speak about 'documentary method'. You make certain choices beforehand but once on location you're in the moment, you let the camera roll and allow things to just happen. Why is it so important for you to capture everything in the most natural way possible?

"I wanted to show these locations the way I discovered them for myself, which is why I started filming. They form the stage in which a personal pilgrimage unfolds. While I was filming, an oil field was discovered in the river delta, drilling has already started under the Venus temple. A massive surge of construction of power plants and highways is taking place in the region; the rituals I have filmed are beginning to disappear. With my camera I've been able to capture them."

The film is about the energy from the genius loci through which extraordinary things can happen. In fact I try to film something that isn't there, to visualize something that in itself is 'unseeable'. It's a kind of magic; it can be that suddenly everything falls in place and you gain insight. Those are the moments I wait for. If that happens to me when I see it, I try to create a montage so that the same can happen for the viewer. The structure of the film parallels the process of a pilgrimage: it is about an insight that unfolds along the way. You could call the result a creative documentary, DraMAYama is a hybrid form. I am an artist, not a purist. I don't bother with rigid definitions [literally: rectilinear divisions]. For me documentary and fiction are not opposing genres.

I have no crew around me and because of the sacred site, the complexity of temple rules, bare feet, vegetarian and non alcoholic and sober situation, The images were partly filmed with my smartphone on a gimbal. This way I don't stand opposite the people I film, but amongst them. I've been a professional dancer, I'm a mobile camerawoman: I turn, run, lie, and crawl. Because of this the spectator feels like they are there themselves, that is what I want. Branly guides the viewer on their own pilgrimage. They lose themselves for a little while, as it were -

What I wanted to achieve is a shift in perspective; I am in the search of the post-colonial view. The film revolves around polyphony. I present many different voices, but not a single Westerner. There is no scientist that explains things to us, there is no authority. In the film there is speaking, whispering, poetry reading and singing. In all sorts of non-native versions of English, in Tamil, and in Maya K'iche'. Some things remain unspoken. Gender boundaries are crossed, there are prayers, images of flowers, trees and animals are prominent in the film. This is specifically done because I want to stretch the frame. Meanwhile, Branly is our guide: through his eyes, we hear his internal monologue.

We Hope the lives of the Mayan community improves in the future and believes this film can help contribute to that. That is also what I hope for; in this sense DraMAYama is a form of 'soft-actism' [Soft-ivism]. It is not a story that is told but an experience that is shared. It is a journey along different stories, a kaleidoscopic voyage of discovery. This is how I try to feed the viewer's imagination, to enrich their view and broaden their mind."

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